



LUTHER
SEMINARY®

FILLED WITH HOPE AND GRATITUDE

2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907)

1

Filled with hope and gratitude and filled with very God,
I sing with soul and spirit exultation,
for God has smiled upon the humble
servant who will give
her own sweet milk to Christ, the world's salvation.

2

God's eternal mercy, meant for all of humankind,
is given as deliv'rance from oppression.
The powerful and haughty find that
they are now cast down,
the lowly raised beyond this world's derision.

3

Hungry people eat good things and find an honored place;
the rich are sent away though they are hungry.
The promise to our forebears
God renews for us today:
the world is filled with God's abundant mercy.

4

Filled with hope and gratitude and filled with very God,
I sing with soul and spirit exultation,
for God has smiled upon the humble
servant who will give
her own sweet milk to Christ, the world's salvation.

Text: Paul Damico-Carper, b. 1981, based on Luke 1:46–55

Text © 2013 Augsburg Fortress

Reprinted under OneLicense.net #A730924

Sunday, November 28

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907, all verses)

We begin our Advent prayers with a song this year. This hymn imagines the hope and exultation that the newly pregnant Mary feels as she embraces Elizabeth, who is in her later years and yet mid-pregnancy. Written for Holden Village and published in the new "All Creation Sings" hymnal, this hymn takes the words of the canticle of Mary (often called the "magnificat") and adds to them the vision of Mary as the birthing mother who nurses the Christ at her breast. Mary's song is an assertion of God's favor for the lowly, for all who are oppressed and in need of just relationship. Combined with the image of a nursing mother, this hymn offers us a powerful glimpse into God's divine action.

Every year at this time we are invited to embrace God's action in the birth of a child, in the intimacy, messiness, and vulnerability of birth. Let us lean into the joy and wonder of that action and remember that God has promised to be with us in a covenant that is eternal. Even though we are living through a time of deep uncertainty, with perils all around us and unknown paths in front of us, we can trust in God.

Mothering God, you draw us to your breast in hope and joy. Help us to breathe in your peace deeply and to breathe out hope and love and justice. Remind us that you are always with us and that your promises endure forever. Amen.

Monday, November 29

Malachi 3:1–4

The prophet Malachi speaks of God's promise to send a messenger. God has sent a messenger—many messengers—to us over the centuries, reminding us that God is truly with us, Emmanuel. But where should we look for such messengers? Our theme hymn suggests that we look to birthing women who, in their travail and pain, still anticipate the joy of new life as they breathe and breathe and breathe again through the pain. Malachi suggests that we can no more refuse God's deep love than we can avoid the pain of God's refining judgement. God draws us into new life through the birth of God's child, reminding us that there is always hope, even in the midst of our suffering.

Mothering God, help us to breathe in deeply your love and breathe out the fear and uncertainties of our time. Help us to breathe in the promises your messengers have brought and breathe out the anxieties and defensiveness it is so easy to feel. We rest in your promise; we lean on your breast. Amen.

Tuesday, November 30

Luke 1:68–79

Mary's song, remembered in the words of our theme hymn for Advent, reminds us that the tender mercy of our God is showered upon us through the birth of the most vulnerable of human beings—an infant. As we watch and pray through this season of Advent, it can be challenging to remember that God is steadfast in God's covenant, and that no matter the darkness and shadow of death through which we walk, still God is always with us, lighting the way and holding us close. Racial injustice, climate catastrophe, COVID-19—even as we struggle through the depths of our sinfulness we are being held close by our God, whose mercies endure forever.

Mothering God, hold us as we try to walk in the communion of saints, remembering the promises you made in your covenant with Abraham and which your peoples have carried forward through the centuries. Help us to trust in this covenant and to walk forward on the path of peace. Breathe with us as we breathe in hope and light, and breathe with us as we breathe out hatred and fear. Amen.

Wednesday, December 1

Philippians 1:3–11

It is difficult to imagine that the Apostle Paul is actually writing from prison as he writes here to the Philippians. He does not express fear or anger, but instead thanksgiving and joy for the gospel and concern for the community, reminding them to put love at the heart of their witness. We are still early in Advent, but I am reminded that the third Sunday of Advent is traditionally "Gaudete Sunday" or "Joy Sunday." Paul's words and example invite us to look for joy throughout this Advent, as we prepare for, as we anticipate this yearly reminder that God's love is with us "until the day of Christ Jesus."

Mothering God, we are so often caught in the prisons of our own brokenness, struggling to see beyond the hurt and the pain we have caused. Remind us of your grace, flood us with your love, draw us beyond our sinfulness, and breathe through us into relationship with all of Creation. Amen.

Thursday, December 2

Luke 3:1–6

This is such a familiar text! And such a powerful reminder that our God is one whose salvation stretches across time and space, reaching into every corner of our world and our being. John's wilderness words are a reminder and call for us to repent, to "turn around" so that we can live into the forgiveness of our sins that comes from the hands of our God. Even now, as we perceive the many ways we have participated in brokenness, we are reminded that every obstacle to God's love will be made low, that every path no matter how winding will lead directly to God. This is the promise we are holding onto during Advent; this is at the heart of our anticipation.

Mothering God, breathe with us in our wandering; help us to feel your love drawing us more deeply toward each other. When the way gets rough, when we want to refuse to see you in the eyes of those we have named as enemies or those who have hurt us, help us to see you anew. Breathe your love into us; help us to breathe out in repentance. Amen.

Friday, December 3

Mark 1:1–8

It almost goes without saying: We are living through challenging times. Far too often it can feel like we are wandering in a desert, torn between conflicting views about justice, about the pandemic, about the very nature of democracy—and whether God is really present and continues to care day to day about this Creation. Our gospel reading reminds us that even in the depths of our fear and uncertainty, God is there lighting a path forward, drawing us close, showing us that repentance leads to forgiveness, and forgiveness grounds our hope. If only we have eyes of trust we will see God's salvation is at hand.

Mothering God, light our way through the deserts of our brokenness. Nurse us into just relationships. Breathe your love and hope into us, and help us to breathe out our anguish and fear. Amen.

Saturday, December 4

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907, Verse 1)

Once again we turn to Mary's song, remembering in these beautiful words the mothering nature of our God. Anyone who has ever nursed an infant knows the rush of joy that comes when one relaxes into the act of breastfeeding. Even in the confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety of being a new parent, there can be hope and gratitude and exultation as milk begins to flow and a babe on the breast quiets into feeding.

Mothering God, help us to relax into your forgiveness, to breathe in your grace and to breathe out our sinfulness. As we await yet again the birth of your son, help us to recognize our brokenness and also lean into the comfort of your promises of eternal life. Amen.

Sunday, December 5

“Filled with Hope and Gratitude” (ACS 907, Verse 1)

What can it mean for our God to smile upon the humble? Far too often we see ourselves as the humble, rather than recognizing all of the ways in which we sin by wreaking havoc upon others. Advent is a time of anticipation, yes, anticipation of God’s entry into our lives through the birth of Jesus the Christ. Yet Advent must also be a time of preparation, of recognizing the many ways in which we continue to hurt others, participate in oppression, and abuse Creation. The words of our song remind us in a special way that God smiles upon the humble. Now is a season for remembering what true humility can be, for accepting God’s power in our lives and living into the depth and width of God’s justice and love.

Mothering God, draw us to your breast as any parent draws a toddler who tantrums. Help us to calm our fears and face our brokenness, nourished always by your loving forgiveness. Help us to breathe in your love and forgiveness and to breathe out our brokenness and hurt. Amen.

Monday, December 6

Zephaniah 3:14–20

Zephaniah’s prophecy reminds us, as the hearers of this strong word, that in our brokenness and disgrace God comes with judgement to save the vulnerable, to remove shame from those we have turned out. Though the words of the prophet may sound harsh at first, they are first of all an invitation to exultation and joy. For they are a reminder that God calls us into love, and while we may turn away from that love in our sinfulness, God never turns away from us. We can—even now—trust God’s promise and turn in renewal towards our relationship with God.

Mothering God, remind us of the strong bonds you have created in us. Show us how we are intimately connected, one to each other, and draw us into your love and peace. Breathe into us your love and hope, help us to breathe out all that draws us into sin. Amen.

Tuesday, December 7

Isaiah 12:2–6

There is so much to this beautiful reading, yet my own reflections seem small and inadequate. God is our salvation and our hope, and God is indeed worthy of our thanks and praise.

As Christians we are commanded to share the gospel. We are to make known God's deeds among the nations and to proclaim God's name. In this secular age, this commandment is exceedingly difficult for many of us. If we truly believe that God is our salvation, if we truly love and believe that God has done such glorious things, how can we not share our experiences? How can we keep this light hidden away when it is the very thing that has brought us life?

Sharing the love of God does not imply coercion. Those tactics do not work anyway. It means sharing our experience with those who do not know Jesus. It means publicly living out a Christian life. It means extending invitations, and it means welcoming those who come seeking. Like the prophet Isaiah says: Shout it aloud and sing for joy!

Glorious God, our salvation and our hope, bless us with a generous spirit and the desire to share the good news about you. Give us courage and strength to enter the world and share your life-giving message with your creation. Amen.

Wednesday, December 8

Philippians 4:4–7

“Do not worry about anything!” Does Paul have any idea what he is talking about? Doesn’t he know we are in a global pandemic; we are facing climate change, inequality, and a slew of other more personal crises daily? There are countless things to worry about—all the time!

And yet, all that worrying doesn’t change anything!

And then Paul follows up this nearly impossible advice by telling us that our prayers of thanksgiving can lead to a peace that surpasses all understanding. But so often we seem unable to even comprehend the peace of God. We cannot comprehend how this will all play out. It is doubtful that many of us can read Paul’s encouragement and really stop worrying for the rest of our lives. But we can share these burdens with Jesus and trust in God instead of worrying alone.

Lord God, we understand you are the creator of the universe. You have infinite love and compassion for your creation. We pray for your peace in this tumultuous time. Amen.

Thursday, December 9

Luke 3:7–18

The imagery in this reading is harsh and vivid: “The ax is lying at the root of the trees, those who do not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire.” Understandably, the people want to know how to avoid such a fate. The answer is deceptively simple: by sharing. If you have two coats, give one away. Share your food with those who are lacking. Though a simple commandment, it is difficult in practice. We are amazingly good at justifying why we shouldn’t or can’t share. What if I need that extra coat? What if I run out of food? Or even more insidious: Maybe that person who is going without is not really deserving of that coat or that food.

However, we are not the judge of the universe. We are not commanded to assess whether someone is deserving—we are simply commanded to share.

Gracious God, we pray that you bless us with a generous spirit. That you help us to overcome our human nature to judge and hoard, and to simply give because it is what you command. Amen.

Friday, December 10

Luke 3:7–18

John the Baptist was a powerful prophet. He gained many followers, he preached repentance, and he baptized in water. As seen in this reading, there were those who wondered, or perhaps even believed, that John was the expected Messiah. John, however, never did any of his important works to elevate himself. He was continually pointing to Jesus, the true Messiah.

Therefore, John is a powerful example for any of us on how to be a witness to the Messiah. He never sought to gain power and influence for his own earthly desires. Though it certainly could have been easy for him to do so, he did not make his ministry about his accomplishments, his desires, or his ego. It is tempting to claim glory for ourselves, to see the successes we’ve had as a reflection of our greatness—not God’s. Like John the Baptist, however, we should always be pointing towards Jesus—always giving him the Glory.

Lord God, forgive our tendency to claim glory for ourselves. We pray that you help us always keep you at the center of our lives and ministries. Amen.

Saturday, December 11

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907, Verse 2)

This hymn verse reminds me of Jesus' statement in the Gospel of Matthew: "The last shall be first, and the first last." The kingdom inverts earthly systems and expectations. The powerful will be brought down, while the lowly are raised. God's kingdom is so unlike that world in which the devil seems to reign.

We live in a world where violence, oppression, and despair seem to rule. But Jesus taught us to pray that God's kingdom would come among us in this world—taught us to hope for the day when God sets everything right. While we can fight for a more just world, Jesus and his transformational power to change people has to always be at the center. And we can anticipate the day when God makes all things right.

God of the marginalized, the oppressed, the suffering, and the lowly: We pray for your justice, your mercy, and your love. We pray for your kingdom to finally come. Amen.

Sunday, December 12

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907, Verse 2)

With its mention of God's mercy, the first line of this hymn verse recalls one of Christianity's most basic prayers: "Lord have mercy!"

It is seemingly so simple and so short, but it gathers all the hopes, fears, and gratitude we hope for and see in the Lord. The prayer is there in the gospel story, but it has taken on ever new meanings in the lives of Christians. It has been a common utterance in churches around the world and on the lips of countless faithful believers. We are all looking for mercy.

Besides the reference to God's mercy, today's verse recalls the pain and suffering we have in the world. "Lord have mercy" is both a prayer and a plea. Have mercy on us. Have mercy on your creation.

Christ is mercy and love. We can trust that when we utter this humble prayer, he is listening, and he will indeed have mercy on us.

Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Amen.

Monday, December 13

Micah 5:2–5a

Today's reading uses imagery of pregnancy and labor. If you have ever waited for the birth of a child, you know the anticipation, the sense of wonder, and the stress it involves. That child is going to change your life, but for now, you are waiting ... waiting.

Advent, too, is a time of waiting, a time of anticipation, and yes, of stress. We are often overwhelmed with lengthy to-do lists: planning holiday events, Christmas shopping, baking treats. With the busyness of the season, it is easy to forget how Israel was waiting for the Messiah. The child that came long ago not only changed the life of his family, but changed the lives of the entire world. This Advent let's keep that sense of wonder and anticipation for the coming Messiah. Let's put that child who saved the world at the center of our lives and thank God for such a gift.

Merciful God, we anticipate the coming of the Christ-child this Advent season. We pray that we don't get caught up in the daily stresses of life and that we keep Christ at the center of our lives. Amen.

Tuesday, December 14

Luke 1:46b–55

Mary spoke these words when she was young, unmarried, and pregnant—not an ideal situation in the ancient world. She was blessed because God chose her, and she accepted the call. She willingly took on an enormous burden: the burden of uncertainty, the burden of carrying a child she did not plan to carry, and later the burden of seeing her beloved son die. I sometimes wonder about her heartbreak at the cross. We know she was there, standing near her child. Did she recall these words that she spoke when she was young? Did she know he would be raised? Did she wonder what all this was for, that she should see her son die like that?

Then Jesus rose from the dead. The gospel narrative of the Bible does not record just how Mary reacted, though I wonder if once again she recalled these words—this time when she seemed to be with full understanding and gratitude.

Glorious God, we cannot fully understand your goodness, your beauty, or your faithfulness, but we pray that we, like Mary, may rejoice in your favor forever. Amen.

Wednesday, December 15

Hebrews 10:5–10

The blood of animals was never enough to take away the sins of the world. It was through Jesus' sacrifice that we are sanctified. It was through his death and resurrection that we find new life. The enormity of that statement can be lost in this discussion in Hebrews about the provisions of the old sacrificial system, but the miraculous nature of Jesus' death for us on the cross remains.

It is Jesus who takes away the sins of the world. It is through Jesus that we are saved.

Jesus is the hope of the world, and we are thankful for this. During these days of Advent, we are waiting to celebrate once again the birth of our Messiah. May we never forget all that he has done for us. We no longer must make sacrifices that will never be enough. All is enough for us because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice.

Our most merciful Christ, you are holy and perfect. May you bless us and keep us. Amen.

Thursday, December 16

Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:45)

"I am so blessed!" How many times have we said this? Probably not as many times as we should! Was Mary blessed? Think about the difficulties of her situation, and decide. Especially since sometimes it is difficult for us, perhaps even for Mary, to see beyond present events and imagine that there could be any blessing in them. But God's blessings transcend our present concerns—these blessings are forever! May we have the faith that Mary had, to look beyond our current situation to see and trust the goodness and faithfulness of God and God's promises for us.

Dear God, give us such faith as Mary had so that we, too, might see the fulfillment of your Word in our lives and in our world. Amen.

Friday, December 17

Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" (Luke 1:46-47)

These are very familiar words—we hear them every Advent. They are filled with rich imagery that draws on the story of the ways that God had blessed the people through the ages. And yet in this reading one word has stood out for readers through the centuries—what does Mary mean when she says that her soul “magnifies” the Lord? The word itself means that something is enlarged or amplified. Perhaps it is something like when we say that our heart “swells” with pride? Mary’s joy in God’s promises makes her joy grow and swell within her, as she thinks about the coming Savior and her role in all this.

Heavenly Father, swell our hearts so that we may rejoice, like Mary, in the coming of your Son. Amen.

Saturday, December 18

“Filled with Hope and Gratitude” (ACS 907, Verse 3)

“The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”
(Luke 1:49)

From one point of view, God had made Mary’s life much more difficult—just think of the troubles that she was to undergo in her lifetime! Unwed mother, refugee, peasant woman, and all the traumas of her son’s life—so often she did not understand. But she trusted God. How many times have we said of something, “That was tough, but I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” Mary could say, in spite of everything, that God had done great things for her—that is faith!

Wonderful Creator, give us such vision and faith to see the great things that you have done and will do for us. May we trust in your promises. Amen.

Sunday, December 19

"Filled with Hope and Gratitude" (ACS 907, Verse 2)

"He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:55)

Sometimes we Christians get so focused on the life and promise of Jesus the Christ that we overlook what God had done before him. Mary remembered. Mary remembered all the love and mercy that God had shown to her ancestors, the children of Israel, and this love of God was a constant throughout their history. The birth of Jesus was not something new, but the culmination of God's grace shown to Abraham and his descendants, going back to the beginning of time.

God of all time, help us to remember your mighty deeds of love and mercy to the children of Israel, and enfold us into your eternal family. Amen.

Monday, December 20

Isaiah 9:2–7

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2)

For those of us who live in the north, winter is often a time of darkness—the days are short and often gray and gloomy. And then there are those rare but wonderful winter days, when the air is crisp and clean, and the sunlight streams down on the sparkling, crystalline snow. The sun is so bright that it makes it difficult to see! Imagine how the light of God breaking into the world in the birth of Jesus can be dazzling to us, we who live in a land of deep darkness!

Burst into our gray and gloomy world, Lord, and into our lives. Help us to see the glory of your light in the good news of your Son. Amen.

Tuesday, December 21

Psalm 96

"Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised." (Psalm 96:3-4)

Christmas is a time for gifts and, of course, the birth of Jesus the Christ is the best gift of all. But sometimes we act as if this gift is only for us—we are tempted to hoard this gift and want to keep it for ourselves. But the gift of the Son of God is for all people, a gift to be shared and celebrated among all people. The greatest gift we can give to this troubled world is the good news that God continues to break into our world with forgiveness and hope—that is a gift worth sharing among all the peoples!

Great is your name, O Lord, and greatly to be praised. Help us to spread your Word among all people. Amen.

Wednesday, December 22

Titus 2:11-14

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:11-13)

Advent and the time before Christmas are a time of intense preparation, both in our homes and in our congregations. But what about our own, personal preparations for the coming of Christ? Are our hearts and lives ready for the birth of our Savior? Titus reminds us that in this present world we are called to live lives worthy of the name that we have been given—child of God. What are your own personal, spiritual preparations for Christmas? Don't let these get lost in the rest of the busyness that can so easily consume these days.

Transform us Lord, into the people worthy of your name. Help us to make our lives ready for the coming of your Son. Amen

Thursday, December 23

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1)

Caesar Augustus was a mighty man, easily hailed and even worshipped as the mightiest person of his day. So that he could more efficiently tax his massive empire, he decreed that a census should be taken. Millions of people had to obey his order. But mighty as he was, his power was temporary. Eventually, he would die, and his empire would crumble. But the one who was born in Bethlehem because of his order was far mightier than any Caesar, or anyone else. He was Jesus the Christ, Son of God, Savior.

Oh God of might, greater than anything in this created world, come to us, we pray, both in your might and in your mighty love. Amen.

Friday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:8-9).

Being a shepherd in those days was a tough, lonely job, and one for persons who were on the margins of society. Shepherds had to be out in the dangerous fields at night, away from the safety and warmth of home. They had to tend animals who were legendary for their tendency to wander away and get into danger. Yet, surprisingly and even miraculously, it was to them that the angels came that night, with the glorious good news of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Into their dark night, the indescribable and glorious light of God's glory first shone.

O God of Light, shine into our lives and into our world with the true light from heaven, your Son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Saturday, December 25 Christmas Day

“Filled with Hope and Gratitude” (ACS 907)

“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart”
(Luke 2:19).

As she went on through the daily grind of life in the northern hill country of Nazareth, Mary must at times have looked and remembered those events of Christmas as if, perhaps, they were some sort of dream. Raising children, feeding the family, trying to keep everyone healthy was a job that took all her energy and then some. Yet those events could not be ignored, and in the middle of performing the humble drudgery of her life, they filled her with hope and gratitude to keep her going. Christmas will soon be over, and we will return to our ordinary lives. But the glory of God’s love in Christmas can lighten our lives all year long.

God of love, kindle your presence in our lives and in our world, not just this special day, but in every day of our lives. Amen.

Continue readings all year long with God Pause by Luther Seminary. Subscribe at luthersem.edu/godpause to receive devotionals by email each morning.

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Mark Granquist

Lloyd and Annelotte Svendsbye Professor of the History of Christianity

Mary Hess

Professor of Educational Leadership and Chair of the Leadership Division

Jennifer Wojciechowski '19 Ph.D.

Visiting Assistant Professor of Church History

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

James L. Boyce '71 M.Div.

Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR

Bethany Riethmeier

Luther Seminary

2481 Como Avenue

651-641-3456

luthersem.edu